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ABSTRACT

Rural school psychologists face unique challenges because of inherent rural attributes including sparse populations, geographic and climatic barriers, and traditional value systems. Mental health resources are typically inadequate in rural America, and the comprehensive roles of well trained school psychologists are frequently misunderstood in rural schools. This paper discusses the rural education context and contrasts the settings of rural and nonrural practitioners. Rural factors that inhibit comprehensive service delivery are discussed as are the difficulties involved in recruiting and retaining qualified school psychologists. An overview of the historical and current use of school psychologists in rural areas is presented. Emerging rural service delivery models and variables to be used in designing appropriate models are discussed, including establishing special education cooperatives and other collaborative structures, interfacing with university training programs, interagency collaboration, training paraprofessionals and existing school personnel to fill multiple roles, and fully using parent and community resources in the schools. It is recommended that preservice training attend to the unique skills and knowledge required of the rural practitioner and that positive inherent rural attributes be fully utilized. It is also recommended that the growing interest of the profession of psychology in rural service delivery include an interdisciplinary focus. A 26-item bibliography is appended. (Author/NEC)

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THE SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST IN THE RURAL EDUCATION CONTEXT

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The School Psychologist in the Rural Education Context

May, 1985

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Abstract

Rural school psychologists face unique challenges because of inherent rural attributes including sparse populations, geographic and climatic barriers, and traditional value systems. Mental health resources are typically inadequate in rural America, and the comprehensive roles of well trained school psychologists are frequently misunderstood in rural schools. This article discusses the rural education context and contrasts the settings of rural and nonrural practitioners. Rural factors that inhibit comprehensive service delivery are discussed as are the difficulties involved in recruiting and retaining qualified school psychologists. An overview of the historical and current use of school psychologists in rural areas is presented. Emerging rural service delivery models are discussed as are variables to be used in designing an appropriate model. It is recommended that preservice training attend to the unique skills and knowledge required of the rural practitioner and that positive inherent rural attributes be fully utilized. It is also recommended that the growing interest of the profession of psychology in rural service delivery include an interdisciplinary focus.

The School Psychologist in the Rural Education Context

Dramatic rural population growth termed the "Rural Renaissance" began in 1972 and has continued. Although popular literature depicts rural environments as bucolic and composed primarily of farming communities, farming has been surpassed as the primary occupation of rural Americans. In fact, 58% of all rural respondents in a recent national survey described their primary economies as small business, manufacturing, resort or extraction based (Helge, 1983a).

Rural communities are far too heterogeneous and complex to be described by simplistic definitions or stereotypes. Rural schools range from obviously isolated schools including 1-10 children in a location 200 miles from the nearest school district to schools located in small clustered towns. Location has tremendous implications for proximity to specialized services offered by school psychologists and others.

Defining Rural Schools

The definition of a rural school has been controversial for quite some time. Population-based definitions (e.g., defining "rural" by the size of the school district) are inadequate as they frequently inadvertently include nonrural districts or exclude local district cooperatives. For example, if the local education agency (LEA) being classified is a county school district, the LEA may have a larger enrollment than 1,000 or even 2,500 but still be very rural. This is especially true when delivery systems to low-income handicaps are the main consideration. Also, in view of the historical emphasis on consolidation of rural districts, and since "rural" generally refers to sparsely populated areas, even though total geographic square miles may differ, a population per square mile definition has been found more functional. This accounts for both the size of the district and the population density of the area.

The 1980 Census defines "rural" as:

> all persons living outside urbanized areas in the open country or in communities with less than 2,500 inhabitants. It also includes those living in areas of extended cities with a population density of less than 1,000 inhabitants per square mile.

This definition contains ambiguous terminology (i.e., "outside urbanized areas in the open country") and does not offer a satisfactory context for defining a rural school district. In fact, this definition could even subsume nonrural areas.

The modified Census definition below has been successfully field tested in research conducted by the National Rural Project (NRP) since 1978.

> A district is considered rural when the number of inhabitants is fewer than 150 per square mile or when located in counties with 60% or more of the population living in communities no larger than 5,000 inhabitants. Districts with more than 10,000 students and those within a standard metropolitan statistical area (SMSA), as determined by the U.S. Census Bureau, are not considered rural (Helge, 1981).

Comparisons Between Rural and Nonrural Communities

There are at least two important caveats in comparing rural and nonrural communities and school systems.

> (1) Even rural communities with the same population numbers, densities, etc., vary tremendously because of the variety of community subcultures they contain. For example, a community's history, ethnic groups, socioeconomic variables, and primary economies influence its attitudes, languages spoken, and other behaviors.
>
> (2) Because of the controversies over the definitions of rural, suburban, and urban, it is useful to think of rural and nonrural characteristics as being on a continuum. In fact, Nachtigal (1982) stated that "depending on factors of size and isolation (geographical and/or cultural), communities will display certain characteristics in varying degrees."

Table 1 below indicates issues differentiating rural and nonrural school systems (Helge, 1984a).

Table 1

ISSUES DIFFERENTIATING RURAL AND NONRURAL SCHOOL SYSTEMS

Issues	Rural	Nonrural
Percentage of School Population Served	2/3 (67%) of all school districts are classified as rural.	1/3 (33%) of school districts are classified as metropolitan.
Personnel Turnover	Turnover occurs in all personnel. Turnover is commonly 30-50% among specialized personnel such as school psychologists and speech, physical, and occupational therapists. Turnover is especially serious among itinerant personnel serving low-incidence populations.	Turnover more commonly involves superintendents and special education directors (i.e., management personnel.)
Transportation	Long distances involved in transporting services, students, and staff. Long distances problematic in planning and implementing interagency collaboration. High costs associated with transportation. Climatic and geographic barriers to travel: mountains; desert; icy, muddy roads; flooding seasons; blizzards; snow storms, etc.	Logistics of transportation problems primarily evolve around desegregation issues or which agency or bureaucratic structure is to pay for transportation.
Community Structure	Sense of "community spirit" prevalent. Personalized environment prevails.	Depersonalized environment except in inner-city pockets of distinctive ethnic groups, several of which may be incorporated into any one school system.
Geography	Problems posed by remote areas include social and professional isolation, long distances from services, and geographic barriers (e.g., mountains, deserts, and islands.)	Logistics of city itself often pose problems (e.g., negotiating transportation transfers, particularly for wheelchairs, crossing lines for one agency versus another to pay, traffic, etc.)
Backlog of Children for Testing and Placement	Result of lack of available services (School psychologists, agency programs, funds, etc.) or lack of parent understanding and permission for testing.	Result of bureaucratic and organizational barriers.
Communication	Communication mainly person to person	Written memo frequently used.

Table 1 (Continued)

Issues	Rural	Nonrural
Student Body Composition	Small numbers of handicapped students and diverse ethnic and linguistic groups pose difficulties for establishing "programs" for bilingual or multicultural students. Difficulties serving migrant handicapped students because of low numbers of students and few appropriate resources available. Qualified bilingual and multicultural personnel difficult to recruit to rural areas. Appropriate materials and other resources typically unavailable or inappropriate for rural communities. Religious minorities are frequently strong subcultures in rural America.	Complexity of open student populations. Wide variety of ethnic and racial ethnic groups.
Approach of Educators	Generalists expected to be "all things to all people."	Specialists must be an expert on one topic area or with one age group or disability.
Cooperation Among Agencies	Cooperation is an inherent attribute of most rural communities. Interagency collaboration is inhibited by long distances to travel, few staff hours available for planning, and isolation or nonexistence of many types of service agencies.	"Turfdom" is common. Bureaucratic mazes and policies make interagency collaboration difficult.
Enrollment of School Aged Children	5.3% (nearly twice that of urban figures)	Almost one-half that of rural.
Population Density	Sparse populations ranging from remote (scattered) density to small (clustered) towns.	High population density.
Management Orientation	"Management by Tradition"	"Management by Crisis"

(Helge, 1984a).

Many rural and nonrural service delivery problems occur for similar reasons. For example, inner city and rural schools both suffer from inequitable federal (and sometimes state) funding and economic policies (Gibboney & Larkin, 1982; Helge, 1981). Both types of service areas also contain disproportionate numbers of elderly citizens who are frequently not supportive of school programs. As both rural and urban America are composed of high ratios of poor, aged populations existing on fixed incomes, it is understandable that it is typically difficult for both areas to gain support for schools (e.g., passage of bond issues). Of course, there are many aspects of rural and nonrural problems which differ in intensity and pervasiveness. For example, declining enrollment is a very difficult problem in most urban environments, a serious problem in suburban schools, and is beginning to be felt as a problem in many rural areas. However, dramatic exceptions to this rule are occurring in the "boom or bust" areas such as mining and extraction towns presenting enormous overnight service delivery and planning problems for rural administrators.

Generally, rural and nonrural school systems experience similar service delivery problems but for (sometimes dramatically) different reasons. Some examples of this are depicted in Table 2 below.

Table 2

EXAMPLES OF SIMILAR SERVICE DELIVERY PROBLEMS
OCCURRING FOR DIFFERENT REASONS

Service Delivery Problems	Nonrural Reasons	Rural Reasons
Inequitable Funding and Education Policies	"Separate but unequal" school systems are created by government policies and funding mechanisms facilitating inadequate tax bases. The existence of inner-city minority groups with little political clout facilitates unequal treatment for urban students with special needs.	Rural citizens and "advocates" are fewer in number and therefore less vocal. Sparse populations facilitate policies which ignore rural problems.
Unfavorable School P.R.	Political scandals, problems with teacher unions, violence, etc., create negative attitudes about urban school programs and administrative abilities to manage problems.	Apathy; lack of adequate staff time or expertise to effectively educate communities; rural citizens in some communities place relatively low value on formal education.
Personnel Recruitment and Retention Problems	School discipline problems, crime, pollution, violence, etc., provide "disincentives" for many qualified school psychologists and educators.	Low salary levels, social and professional isolation, lack of career ladders, long distances to travel, and rural conservatism pose disincentives.
Low Tax Bases	Inner-city decline and lack of taxpayers (.g., because of low income government housing or corporate advantages with tax payment).	Agricultural areas with tax breaks; poverty populations and disproportionate numbers of elderly citizens on fixed incomes.
Student Cannot be Tested	Bureaucratic "red tape" imposed by large central administration vastly removed from site of services; mental health agency in one suburb differs with local district regarding philosophy of working with severely emotionally disturbed children.	School psychologist cannot be recruited; district personnel will not accept services of an itinerant psychologist; parents will not allow an "outsider" to test their child.

The above examples relate to similar rural and nonrural service delivery problems. It is also common for the variations in rural and nonrural environments to pose dramatically different problems in service delivery, as illustrated in Table 3 below.

Table 3

SAMPLES OF DIFFERENCES IN RURAL AND NONRURAL ENVIRONMENTS THAT IMPACT SERVICE DELIVERY

Nonrural	Rural
Prolonged and frequent teacher strikes promote loss of valuable education time.	Unavailability of personnel or services or long distances to travel decrease educational time available.
Bureaucratic mazes and policies prohibit assessment of special needs and delivery of services in a reasonable amount of time.	Lack of psychologists and other resources available to assess student needs and provide services.
Dual school system approaches of private and public education create decreased tax bases and/or loss of qualified personnel to provide services.	Local economy or attitudes generally prohibit initiation of private schools (Notable exceptions exist when private schools are created to foster segregation. Lack of alternatives (educational monopoly) is sometimes responsible for lack of specialized/adequate educational programs.
Case management difficulties because of "turfdom" among agencies that should be cooperating.	Case management difficulties related to a generalist approach (frequently meaning all services are provided by one person).
Psychologist-student relationship and services inhibited by bureaucratic structure (e.g., overlapping services provided by numerous impersonal agencies; services frequently fragmented.)	Psychologist-student relationship inhibited by number of miles practitioner has to drive to reach special needs child.
Centralized power structures frequently responsible for decisions being made and implemented that are inappropriate at the local level.	"Burnout" of psychologists traveling long distances tended to occur or psychologists tended to terminate services more quickly than they should have because of distance, time and weather involved in reaching a special needs child.

Differences in Recommendations for Improvement of Rural and Nonrural Schools

For decades, rural schools have been told by external entities how to improve their schools. Mandates have primarily come from state legislatures and federal regulations directly or indirectly emphasizing consolidation of small rural schools. While some benefits were provided by such mandated changes, many problems have also arisen from such external edicts for "improvement" (Sher, 1977).

In contrast, nonrural school systems have primarily been told how to "improve" by "insiders" (typically complex bureaucratic structures and politicized school boards governing operations). However, even regarding desegregation and other externally mandated matters, nonrural schools have not been told how to administratively structure themselves.

Currently, there is a self-initiated urban thrust for decentralization to enable school building administrators and faculty to make local decisions regarding curriculum, personnel, and teaching--versus waiting for and following dictates of centralized urban bureaucracies (Gibboney & Larkin, 1982).

Many rural schools are still fighting external consolidation movements but have usually had freedom to make decisions regarding curriculum, personnel, and teaching styles. Power bases have usually included the informal messengers to local school board members and school administrators.

Urban and suburban districts have typically requested government assistance and viewed federal and state governments as possibly assisting with solving their problems (Gibboney & Larkin, 1982); whereas rural schools have resisted this type of "outside interference."

Urban school advocates are now initiating moves to dismantle large centralized school bureaucracies that they feel inhibit their abilities to

engage in grass roots solutions to problems (Gibboney & Larkin, 1982). In contrast, a traditional strength of rural America has been its self-help ethos. In fact, the rural problems which rural administrators have felt were thrust upon them because of lack of interest or inequitable policies by federal and state governments have centered around inadequate resources with which to attempt to solve their own problems.

Rural School Factors Inhibiting Service Delivery

Two-thirds (67%) of all schools in the United States are in rural areas. These rural schools serve 32% of America's school children, but the majority of unserved and underserved special needs children live in rural areas (Helge, 1983). According to the President's Commission on Mental Health (1978), rural children and their families are characteristically unserved or underserved by non-school health and mental health professionals.

Thus, rural America poses unique challenges for school psychologists. Problems in delivering school psychological services in rural settings are fully described below but generally center around difficulties generated by sparse populations, long distances to travel, isolation from related services, and community or district attitudes toward services. Unique challenges for rural school psychologists delineated via 1978-83 NRP studies are summarized below (Helge, 1984a, 1982, 1981a; Helge & Marrs, 1982).

Cultural Factors

Language Barriers. Language differences within rural subcultures decrease the capacity of local districts to obtain school psychologists who are able to speak the appropriate language. This also affects the quality of interaction between parents and psychologists.

Cultural Differences. Many rural subcultures do not value education as highly as do nonrural communities. in such cases, it is more difficult for school districts to identify children with problems and to plan for meeting their needs. Many handicapped children, for example, able to perform in marginal or produc-

tive roles in their subcultures without the benefit of specialized services, are not perceived as handicapped by their subcultures. However, as they enter the mainstream of American society, they often face seemingly insurmountable barriers.

Resistance to Change. Resistance to change is a major inhibitor to service delivery. Residents of most rural areas clearly value tradition. In addition, there is a general suspicion of innovations and a reluctance to change practices without a clear demonstration that change improves an existing situation. In practice, this ranges from problems with shifting school administrator's attitudes from viewing school psychologists solely as "psychological examiners" to lack of acceptance of the roles of itinerant psychologists.

The deeply ingrained rural ethos of "self-help" and suspicion of outsiders (e.g., itinerant psychologists) frequently culminate in lack of family interest or involvement in psychological services. Even more unfortunate, parental approval is frequently denied.

Resistance to program change stems from school board members, administrators, education staff, and parents. Since traditional decisions, values, and operations are typically perceived as having been established in the best interest of children; efforts to alter these processes frequently meet with a great deal of resistance.

Geographic and Climatic Inhibiting Factors

Poor Roads. Marginal roads cause serious problems in service delivery. For itinerant school psychologists, poor road conditions add to the travel time required to move from one assignment to another. Consequently, units of actual service cost more under such conditions than in areas where roads are adequate.

Mountainous Areas: Icy, Muddy Roads. These factors contribute to higher costs per unit of service and are frequently directly responsible for disrupting continuity of (already inadequate) services and contributing to long delays in delivery of assessment and evaluation procedures. School psychology services are most severely affected when services are provided outside the district or on an itinerant basis.

Distance Between Schools and Services. By far the most serious problem in this cluster is the prevalence of long distances between rural schools and psychological services. The problem is compounded in schools with insufficient numbers of students needing services to financially justify employing full-time psychologists. Implications of this include

long bus rides for students or an unusual amount of travel time by itinerant specialists. The latter can contribute to sporadically delivered services and very little contact between psychologists and families of children with special needs.

Socioeconomic Factors

Economic Class Differences. Economic class differences also place restrictions on rural school abilities to offer comprehensive school psychological services. A predominant factor is the difference in the value placed upon educating students with special needs. Some local education agency cultures do not favor expenditures for individuals whom they do not feel will be productive citizens.

An additional mitigating factor is the existence of economically deprived parents who have more immediate subsistence concerns than the education or mental health of their children. As a result, many local education agency personnel become frustrated by these parents who will not or cannot pay the same degree of attention to their children's educational program as do some parents in higher income groups.

Poverty is disproportionately high in rural areas. Psychological, medical, and other services are frequently inaccessible, inadequate or nonexistent. This is sometimes responsible for higher incidences of primary and secondary handicapping conditions. In fact, although the mental health of rural communities has been neglected, rural communities are comprised of more persons who are at risk for mental health problems (e.g., the poor and minorities including migrant populations).

Limited Financial Resources. Rural schools are often faced with limited financial resources and disproportionate funding formulas. These districts are often supported by an insufficient tax base which affects the district's ability to deliver full services. Inequities exist in state tax laws, school financing and funds distribution. Rural districts spend greater percentages of local funds than nonrural districts. The financial costs of school services, especially those for handicapped children, have grown dramatically in recent years, and it is becoming increasingly difficult for districts to meet the spirit of PL 94-142 and other laws.

Problems are currently being exacerbated by failing farm economies. In other instances, rapid growth in

population because of transient industrial development increases the difficulties for local districts attempting to fund programs.

Suspicion of External (Federal and State) Interference
Suspicion of "outside interference" is frequently a major problem. For example, 72% of all districts in a 1983 survey reported this attitude contributed to difficulties in implementing PL 94-142. This sometimes stems from pride in self-sufficiency or resentment toward federal bureaucracies. In some areas, local districts have refused flow-through funds in order to avoid federal monitoring.

Suspicion of external interference is, of course, closely related to resistance to change. Many rural areas are proud of their traditions and perceive mandated changes as threats to their ability to control their own destinies. Such suspicions are sometimes more strongly held by school officials and board members than rural citizens in general. Ironically in this instance, externally mandated changes would include more active participation by parents and community groups in the development of educational services for handicapped children.

Migrant Employment. Difficulties in tracking migrant children for service delivery as they move from site to site poses problems in program continuity (e.g., counseling and other follow up after testing). In some states, heavy development of energy resources has resulted in temporary influxes of workers and placed acute demands on local education agencies for service delivery. School districts are frequently reluctant to seek new funds for programs that might not be necessary in the future; services in some such areas are extremely inadequate.

Difficulties Recruiting and Retaining Qualified School Psychologists

Factors such as professional and social isolation, extreme weather conditions, vast distances to travel, inadequate housing, and low salaries create conditions that make it difficult to employ school psychologists in many rural schools. Many positions remain unfilled for months and others for years.

Many rural school psychologists are young and inexperienced. Social and cultural isolation contribute to many practitioners leaving rural settings. Studies have indicated that the attrition rates for rural school

psychologists are exceptionally high (Helge, 1981, 1983a, 1984a). In fact, Hughes (1982) determined that the turnover rate for rural school psychologists in Virginia was 4 times as large as the rate for their urban counterparts.

High attrition rates have serious ramifications for program stability, family involvement, and personnel development (i.e., the psychologist educating other staff concerning program needs). Specific disincentives for rural school psychologists are detailed below.

Inappropriate Usage of Professional Time Inhibiting Ability to Perform

Low salaries, while frequently a disincentive to rural practice, are not the most serious hindering factor. Rather, conditions directly related to professional satisfaction and the ability to perform contribute most highly to personnel attrition. A major factor is a lack of understanding on the part of parents and school personnel concerning the role of the psychologist and inappropriate use of the practitioner's time and skills. This is particularly true in situations in which the function of the psychologist is viewed primarily or solely as an administrator of tests to determine eligibility for special education services. This attitude was fostered during the rapid expansion of services (particularly during 1976-1980) to exceptional students when many rural schools availed themselves of school psychological services for the first time. This type of attitude inhibits the provision of comprehensive service delivery and allows inadequate periods of time for counseling, consultation, inservice education, evaluation services and other follow-through functions of a well trained psychologist.

Unsatisfactory Working Conditions

A commonly noted problem is the lack of adequate facilities and materials. Itinerant psychologists in particular frequently suffer from lack of an office or a consistent and quiet place to work with teachers, students, and their families.

Itinerants housed in a special education cooperative or other collaborative structure are also frequently faced with difficulties related to lines of accountability because they are hired by the collaborative to work with some or all of its districts. Some collaboratives find it effective to allocate district costs on the basis of the

amount of time in service delivery in that particular district; other districts prefer that staff payments be equally split, no matter where services were delivered. Such philosophical differences can cause problems for the itinerant. Accountability systems are frequently difficult to detect, and informal systems often differ dramatically from those of the formal organizational chart. Hidden agendas are sometimes prolific in collaboratives because each district feels ultimately responsible to the local community. Attitude change and inservice concerning comprehensive school psychology services may be difficult in the midst of competing local priorities.

The lack of appropriate assessment, counseling, or instructional materials is frequently cited as a problem. The lack of competent/interested persons who can engage in follow-through is also generally noted.

Heavy Caseloads

Surveys have consistently noted that rural school psychologists have a heavy caseload (Trenary, 1981a; DeMers, Cohen & Fontana, 1981; Hamblin, 1981; Helge, 1981, 1984). Although this is also a frequent complaint of nonrural practitioners, many rural psychologists report small numbers of students spread over vast geographic areas. Job responsibilities are often complicated by itinerant travel over difficult terrain in inclement weather. A 1984 NASP study (Benson, et. al., 1984) indicated that 48% of the rural school psychologists surveyed were responsible for 6 or more schools. The mean school psychologist/pupil ratio of those surveyed was 1:2639 with a range of up to 1:8000. Regardless of the actual number of cases carried by rural school psychologists, a large percentage of the practitioner's work time tends to be focused on individual case activities, such as assessment, leaving inadequate time for attention to other roles of the job. Pressures are also frequently added by other school personnel regarding the role of the school psychologist and the allocation of the individual's work time.

This situation appears to be even more problematic when a district employs part-time and contract school psychologists. For example, Meyer (1983) found that the average psychologist:student ratio was 4-5 times larger than the average ratio for school districts employing full-time practitioners.

Professional Isolation

Rural psychologists, particularly those in itinerant settings, tend to be isolated not only from professional libraries and other resources, but from the solace of conversing and exchanging information with colleagues. In fact, the second most noted area of concern (second only to the area of inadequate alternate programs for special needs

students) to practitioners in the 1984 NASP survey (Benson, et. al., 1984) was limited access to fellow psychologists for formal consultation. Rural schools are also not within easy commuting distance of diagnostic centers or consultants.

Rural practitioners frequently have difficulty obtaining ancillary services when needed. For example, the NASP survey identified a concern among rural practitioners that community agencies for counseling and parent education services were unavailable (Benson, et. al., 1984). Since many practitioners function on an itinerant basis, there may be little contact between the psychologist and classroom teachers. With special education students, this usually means that once an evaluation is completed, a placement made, and an individualized education program (IEP) designed, contact between the teacher and school psychologist may be severed.

Inadequate Staff Development Programs

The lack of local continuing education and training for rural school psychologists has been well documented (Helge and Marrs, 1981; Benson, 1982). The 1984 NASP survey of rural school psychologists indicates that this remains a concern of rural practitioners (Benson, et. al., 1984).

Cultural Isolation and Lack of Familiarity with Local Culture

Most rural practitioners are isolated from cultural resources. Those who are newcomers to a rural area frequently do not understand local communication and power structures. Because this can inhibit knowing "how to get things done" and limit one's acceptance in a tightly-knit rural community, this can cause significant difficulties in securing district or family cooperation in implementing service recommendations. This is particularly true in the preponderance of rural communities in which the special needs of exceptional children are not understood by parents and other school personnel. Parent involvement and communication becomes more and more difficult as services are removed further from the local school building. Situations requiring child travel to a centralized service facility inadvertently exclude many parents from participating in a child's program.

Difficult Travel

NRP research and the NASP 1984 study found that itinerant personnel, especially those employed by wide ranging special education cooperatives, frequently experienced exhausting travel schedules. The NASP study found that travel ranged from 0 to 1,750 miles per week, with means of 206 miles and 4.9 hours per week. Extensive travel schedules are typically not understood by "stationary" school personnel, and peer reinforcement is minimal. NRP research indicated that significant travel schedules contributed to high attrition rates.

Preservice Training Issues

While some school psychologist training programs have emphasized rural practice and while there has been an increase in programs located in rural areas, the number of programs offering specialized training for rural practice remains small (Fagen, 1981).

The 1984 NASP survey mailed to each state school psychology association indicated that respondents felt that rural service delivery issues are unique. Yet 53% of the respondents had no specific training or significant exposure to rural settings (Benson, et. al., 1984). A number of authors have indicated that specialized training is essential for rural practitioners (Helge, 1983b, 1981; Hughes and Clark, 1981; Benson, et. al., 1984).

Unique skills are required to practice in rural settings; thus, preservice training and professional development programs should address specific circumstances associated with rural education. In fact, rural personnel shortages constitute the most acute area of staffing deficiency because the practitioners have not been trained to adjust to the demands of remote, isolated, or culturally distinct rural areas. The difficulty posed by such areas is not the problem of preparing quantities or sheer numbers of school psychologists, but of preparing practitioners who are willing and capable of serving in areas which impose serious disincentives. The infusion of rural-focused content and methodologies into ongoing training programs can have notable impact on the dramatic personnel retention problems rural schools face (Helge, 1984a, 1983b.)

Suggested Approaches to Development of Rural-Focused Preservice Curriculum

Curriculum should be designed to address critical rural personnel

shortages and should use existing training facilities and resources. It should be consistent with certification guidelines for those to be trained, include a substantial amount of training, and be integrated with practicum experience. The cultural aspects (e.g., learning about cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic differences of rural settings) represent a critical training topic.

A curriculum infusion approach (vs. an "add-on" approach) of integrating rural content may be appealing to many faculty who feel they are part of already over-loaded training programs. This could occur through the use of rural psychology curriculum modules designed to be integrated into ongoing university curriculum, rural practicum placement, and via purposeful discussions (e.g., discussing implications of intelligence testing practices for rural minorities).

Other faculty may prefer the initiation of separate rural psychology courses or programs to guarantee a comprehensive focus on rural service delivery systems. In any event, faculty should be able to develop or select specific rural components appropriate for their syllabi. Flexible rural curriculum content is likely to be incorporated because universities are becoming more and more aware of the acute problems their graduates are experiencing when employed by rural areas for which they were not prepared. This is partly because universities are becoming more aware of the serious personnel attrition in rural areas and partly because more rigid processes of accreditation for university preparation programs are resulting in professors seeking feedback from students concerning training inadequacies.

Suggested Competencies

Baseline competencies to prepare school psychologists should continue to be the responsibility of ongoing school psychology training programs. However, many of the infused rural-focused competencies will strengthen existing program competencies.

Suggested competencies for a rural school psychology core curriculum are outlined below. Each topic is included because of a specific need identified during 1978-83 NRP research in over 200 rural districts across America and from literature reviews. For example, the "state of the art of rural education" is included because NRP studies found that new personnel became dissatisfied with their jobs if they were unaware of rural school realities (e.g., many rural communities do not have specialists available for first-level screening and/or mental health agencies with which to collaborate). Dissatisfied personnel are generally not as effective as they might otherwise be and frequently leave rural school positions. These factors are partly responsible for the high attrition rates of 35% to 50% in rural schools across the country, and these rates are higher than in nonrural areas (Helge, 1981, 1984a).

The competencies listed below reflect a balance of knowledge regarding rural service delivery models and skills for personal development. This approach was taken because NRP research indicated that rural personnel frequently leave their positions or do not perform successfully because of personal (vs. professional) dissatisfaction. Rural practica and internships will aid in establishing the attitudes and values seen as helpful in working in rural areas.

Competencies for a Core Curriculum for Rural School Psychologists

1. Students will demonstrate an understanding of the context of a rural school and its environment. (This should include an emphasis on discerning local communication and power structures.)
2. Students will demonstrate an understanding of differences involved in serving students in rural and in urban environments.
3. Students will demonstrate knowledge concerning the state-of-the-art of education and psychological services in rural America.

4. Students will demonstrate knowledge of effective service delivery models for rural children, including those with low-incidence disabilities such as severe emotional disturbances. (This should include an understanding of administrative and legal service delivery issues.)
5. Students will demonstrate an awareness of alternate resources to provide comprehensive psychological services to rural students.
6. Students will demonstrate skills in working with nuclear and extended families of rural students.
7. Students will develop skills in working with citizens and agencies in rural communities to facilitate cooperation among schools and service agencies.
8. Students will demonstrate an understanding of personal development skills (a) for their own professional growth and (b) to build a local support system in their rural environment.
9. Students will develop skills in working with peer professionals from rural environments.

A Historical Perspective

National rural school studies (Helge, 1981, 1984b) have indicated that school psychologists are relative newcomers to rural school programs designed to serve students with special needs. According to Fagan (1981), the first services were provided by "circuit riders," usually employed by universities, mental health facilities, or intermediate agencies.

Now, rural school districts hire full-time or part-time school psy-

chologists, have cooperative agreements for sharing practitioners (e.g., with mental health centers or university clinics), or contract with individual psychologists.

A national study comparing differences in service delivery to handicapped students before and after the implementation of PL 94-142 discerned significant increases in diagnostic and evaluation services related to appropriately serving students with special needs. The predominant number of districts and cooperatives surveyed had begun to implement multidisciplinary evaluation processes, and awareness had grown regarding problems in implementing nondiscriminatory testing procedures. The study also discerned significant increases in the percentage of rural schools using the services of school psychologists (Helge, 1980).

Table 4 below illustrates the extent of differences.

Table 4

DIFFERENCES IN PERCENTAGE OF RURAL SCHOOLS OFFERING SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY SERVICES BEFORE AND AFTER IMPLEMENTATION OF PL 94-142

	Before	After	Percentage of Change
*Contracted Services	44%	45%	+02%
**Non-Contracted Services	24%	52%	+117%

(Helge, 1980)

*Contracted services were provided by personnel who were hired by a district/cooperative to accomplish specific tasks (typically administration of intelligence tests).

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The most common employment of psychologists in rural America has been via contracting non-district personnel. The use of contracted and part-time psychologists is generally denigrated by psychologists and their trainers (e.g., Fagan, 1985; Meyer, 1983). Reasons include the fact that a contracted or part-time psychologist tends to spend the majority of professional time testing students. In such cases, there is very little access to the psychologist by parents and school personnel; limited student counseling; limited or no input for in-school screenings of children; no crisis intervention available; limited inservice education offerings; limited consultation with parents and teachers; no program development input; and no research and evaluation involvement (Meyer, 1983). The ramifications of the fact that part-time and contracted practitioners are also not generally reimbursed for professional development experiences are obvious. Part-time services can be arranged in such a manner to surmount these problems (Fagan, 1984).

Because of the previously described serious difficulties recruiting and retaining qualified school psychologists, and related personnel such as educational diagnosticians, it has been common for rural school districts to contract with "psychological examiners." Many possess dubious credentials and test 4 or more students per day. Such limited psychological services are frequently all the school district has known, and the district often pays more for the restricted part-time services they seek than the cost of sharing a full-time school psychologist with a neighboring district. Fagan (1981) found that districts following such a practice often paid more for expensive counseling, consultation, inservice education, and evaluation services throughout the year than a qualified school psychologist, under contract, could provide for no additional expense (Fagan, 1981). Other investigators have also found this design to be responsible for less comprehensive service delivery (Fagan, 1985; Meyer, 1983; Helge, 1980).

Obviously, the incompatible perceptions of well-trained school psychologists and hiring administrators are a significant barrier to the growth of quality school psychological services in rural areas. Fagan (1985) emphasized that establishing appropriate roles and functions for the school psychologist is an important cost factor whether services are conducted by a full-time or part-time contractural (non-district) or district employee (Fagan, 1985).

Emerging Service Delivery Models

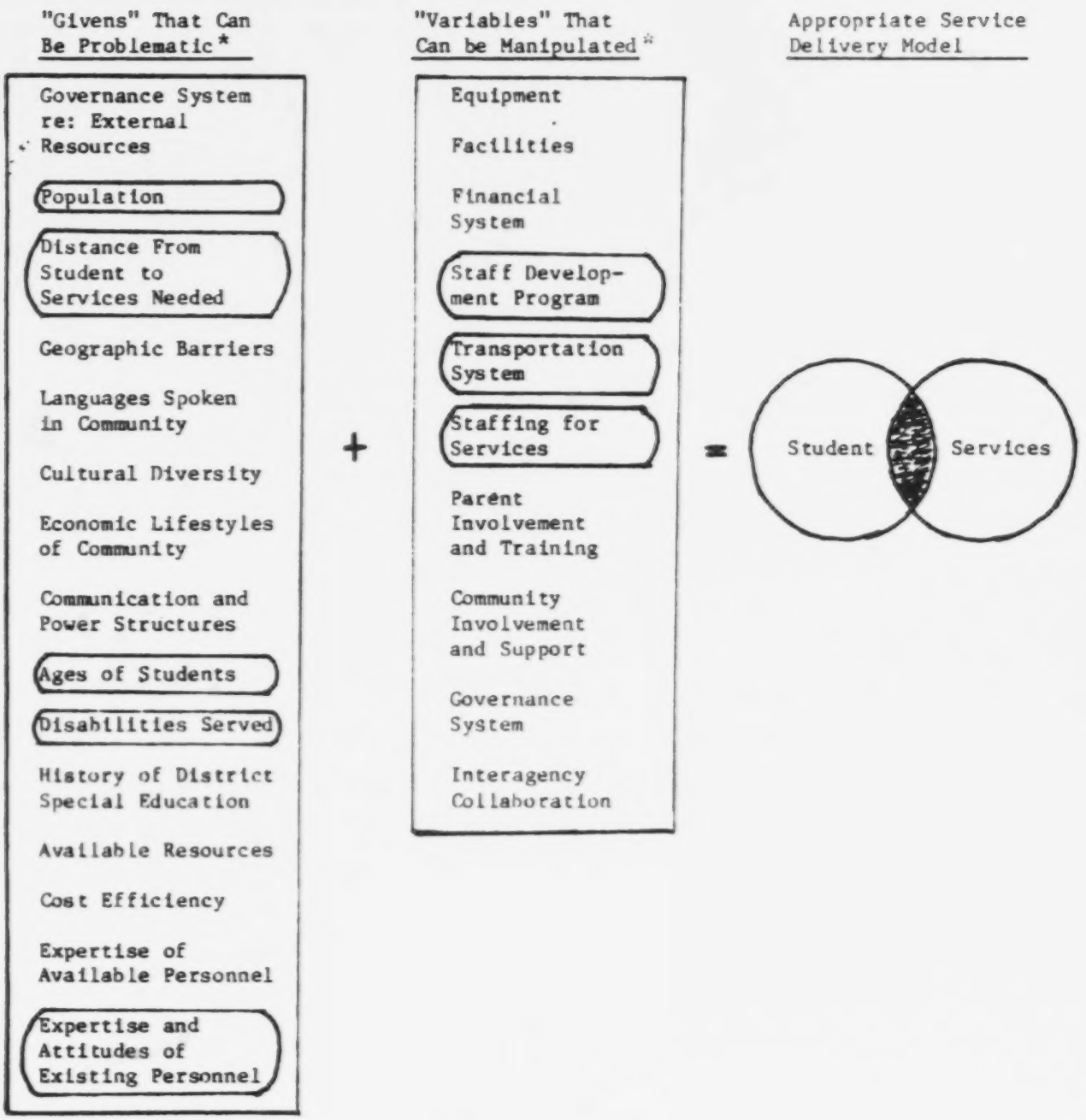
Because of greater resources, nonrural schools are typically better able to provide comprehensive services including psychoeducational assessment, counseling with students and families (including home visits), staff and school board consultation and inservice training, and systemwide program design and research. Rural schools, out of necessity, have devised a number of innovative models to compensate for inadequate resources.

Just as urban models are not appropriate for rural schools, there is no "one" rural service delivery model for the great variety of rural school systems and their attendant subcultures. It cannot be assumed that a practice effective in remote Wyoming ranching territory will be viable on an isolated island, in part of a cluster of New England seacoast towns, or in an agricultural migrant camp. Instead, service delivery models must be individually designed for the rural school systems and subcultures in which they will be implemented.

Figure 1 illustrates the process of designing a rural service delivery model. Factors that can present planning problems but cannot be controlled by the model designer are termed "givens." Factors that can be manipulated by the planner are labeled "variables." The planner can create an appro-

Figure 1

Consideration of "Givens" and Manipulation of
"Variables" Allows the Planner to Create
An Appropriate Service Model



G + V = M

*Items circled are illustrative.

priate service delivery model by recognizing givens and controlling variables. The following ten models are examples of emerging rural service delivery models.

Collaborative Administrative Structures

Special education cooperatives, education service districts, and other collaborative administrative structures have been designed to facilitate sharing of school psychologists and other personnel. Where geographic distances and climatic variables are not unwieldy, districts can cooperatively hire a practitioner to serve students who were previously unserved or underserved because a single district could not afford a full-time person to serve a few students. This practice also encourages joint funding of inservice training, equipment, media, and materials. Districts located in close enough proximity frequently cooperatively transport students and/or centralize diagnostic or intervention services.

Satellite Centers

These centers provide a variety of psychological services funded by a regional or state mental health center. Sometimes housed in schools, the distance is closer to the student than would otherwise be the case, with a goal being to minimize loss of time available for student instruction.

Interdisciplinary Team Models

Usually initiated to serve special education students, this model involves local interdisciplinary teams (I-Teams), a regional educational specialist (ES), and a state interdisciplinary team. Each level interfaces with the others. Each I-Team contains a school psychologist, special educators, and relevant specialists such as a communications or physical therapist.

The regional educational specialist is locally based and coordinates services for multihandicapped students in a region. A local or state I-Team member may be asked for assistance. The regional ES position reduces travel time required to deliver services including assessment; staffing to generate recommendations; training of teachers, parents, educational specialists, and others; monitoring the implementation of recommendations; and coordinating training and consultative services.

Local I-Team members encourage parent support by home visits and by providing parent training. The state also provides technical assistance and training to all local I-Teams needing such services.

Interfaces with University Training Programs

This model includes the use of university students as interns and practica students, under supervision. Campus faculty are also sometimes used as providers of inservice, consultants, or partners in the development and field testing of experimental models.

Interagency Collaboration

Sharing of personnel, facilities, equipment, and transportation schedules has been an especially promising practice for remote rural areas with few specialized resources. Psychologists from mental health centers can train teachers for classroom intervention/follow-through; mental health, senior citizen, and other buses can be shared and transportation schedules synchronized; and psychologists available through neighboring satellite centers, substance abuse, crisis intervention, halfway houses, or outpatient clinics can be utilized.

Traveling Clinics and Itinerant Psychological Services

Most itinerant services were initiated to prevent students from having to leave their local area to receive services. This inhibits social stigma and allows more on-campus instruction for the student. Itinerants typically offer three basic types of assistance: (a) psychoeducational assessment, (b) direct intervention with students and families (including home visits), and (c) training of and consultation with school district staff. This assistance takes place during site visits to rural areas on a regular or intermittent basis. (E.g., visits may be part of a technical assistance agreement designed by the district/cooperative and another agency or may be on an "ad hoc" basis.)

Use of Paraprofessionals

Trained paraprofessionals are frequently used by rural school districts when certified personnel are unavailable. Paraprofessionals support psychologists and other specialists in conducting therapy, counseling, or classroom activities. An essential ingredient in the effective design of a paraprofessional model is appropriate training and careful observation of performance. Trained paraprofessionals are frequently teamed with parent and community volunteers. Paraprofessionnal personnel are usually paid staff members, although they may also be volunteers.

Training Existing Staff to Provide Multiple Roles

This model involves training teachers and mobile personnel within a school (e.g., principals) to assist the psychologist. Existing school personnel can be trained to assist in problem identification, crisis intervention and follow-through of therapeutic or IEP suggestions. A by-product of this model is increased understanding of appropriate roles and functions of the school psychologist.

Home-based Early Intervention

Though still relatively unique, this model is becoming more common as early childhood special education programs and mandates increase. Gotts described an example called Aids to Early Learning in Childs and Melton (1983). This example included daily television lessons in the home, weekly printed support materials and home visitation to parent and child by a carefully trained paraprofessional, and weekly group experiences for children in a mobile classroom van capable of serving isolated rural settings.

Models Incorporating Advanced Technologies

The use of advanced technologies as tools for serving remotely located students with low-incidence disabilities is rapidly growing in popularity. Model design ranges from psychologist-teacher communication by satellite to mobile inservice vans bearing computers programmed to teach specific follow-through skills. Less expensive models include exchanges of videotapes and one/two way television instruction.

Technological assistance with testing procedures and scoring, therapeutic intervention, management and staff development is proving invaluable in rural practice. Isolated psychologists can link with others via existing telecommunication systems (e.g., the Rural Bulletin Board of SpecialNet), develop specialized electronic bulletins boards focusing on issues of interest, link via satellite to increase communication and staff development opportunities, and exchange videotapes of demonstrations of effective practices.

Conclusions

Expanded rural growth has been accompanied by unique challenges for rural school psychologists. Rural practitioners face unique challenges because of inherent rural attributes including sparse populations, geographic and climatic barriers, and traditional value systems. Mental health resources are typically inadequate in rural America, and rural schools are thought to have higher student dropout rates and lower academic achievement levels than nonrural schools. Generally, the skills of rural school psychologists have been underutilized. The roles and functions of itinerant practitioners have been particularly misunderstood.

However, rural America also offers unique resources to the practitioner. Rural communities typically maintain a "sense of community," educational professionals are generally respected by lay citizens, families tend to be motivated to participate in school-sponsored functions, and siblings and extended families can become important program resources.

Ideally, rural school psychologists provide comprehensive services such as psychoeducational assessment, counseling with students and families (including home visits), staff and school board consultation and inservice training, and systemwide program design and research.

Preservice trainers must attend to the need for students to fully understand differences between rural and urban schools and service delivery models. Students must learn how to identify local communication systems and power structures and to become accepted by rural colleagues and community members. They must also be trained to identify or "create" local program resources. These competencies are essential if the current acute rural personnel shortages and high rates of attrition are to be effectively addressed.

Emerging rural service delivery models include special education cooperatives and other collaborative structures, interfacing with university training programs, interagency collaboration, training paraprofessionals and existing school personnel to fill multiple roles, and fully using parent and community resources in the schools. Advanced technologies offer exciting alternatives to the current state of professional isolation. For example, rural practitioners could link with existing telecommunications systems (e.g., the "Rural Bulletin Board"), develop specialized electronic bulletin boards focusing on issues of interest to rural school psychology, and link via satellite to increase communication and staff development opportunities. Less expensive alternatives include tapes made by other rural practitioners while engaged in itinerant travel.

In summary, quality mental health and special education services must become more available to the children of rural America. NASP and APA Divisions 27 and 16 have formed rural task forces. Because interdisciplinary practice is imperative in rural America, these special interest groups should relate to other relevant groups including the National Association for Rural Mental Health, the health and related services task force of the American Council on Rural Special Education, the National Rural Education Research Consortium, and the National Consortium of Universities Preparing Rural Special Educators.

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